

## Men's Conference

Centre for the Performing Arts

27 October 2012

Dear brother priests, seminarians and candidates for the permanent diaconate, and dear men of the Archdiocese of Vancouver:

### *Introduction*

The Gospel we have just heard proclaimed presents us with one of the boldest and most blundering men of the New Testament: the Apostle Peter. He was a fisherman who provided for his family, passionate in his preaching, adventuresome in taking the Gospel from Palestine to Rome, and willing to face up to his failures, including the denial of his Master. While it is true that only the Pope is *the* Successor of Peter, all of us should see in this Galilean fisherman a model for living as a man and as a disciple of Jesus.

### *Gospel Call of Peter*

At this point in Luke's Gospel, Peter had already begun to Jesus, but the real starting point of his spiritual journey was his personal encounter with the Lord. Like us, so often, he needed a second call, one that was more direct, more personal, and more felt, before he was ready for his mission.

It happened Simon Peter on an ordinary day, while he was busy with his fisherman's task of washing his nets by the lakeshore. Crowds had gathered around Jesus to listen to him. So numerous were they that

the Lord saw two boats moored by the shore, left by the busy fishermen. He commandeered one of them, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. Sitting on an improvised seat, Jesus began to teach the crowds from the boat (cf. Lk 5:1-3). Thus, the boat of Peter became the chair, the *cathedra*, of Jesus.

***“Duc in Altum!”: “Put out into deep water”***

When he had finished speaking, Jesus said to Simon: “Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch” (Lk 5:4). And Simon answered, after explaining a night passed without catching anything, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets” (Lk 5:5). Even though Jesus was a carpenter by trade, and not a skilled fisherman, Peter trusted this Teacher, but his trust was shaky.<sup>1</sup>

***Peter's Fear: “Go away from me”***

Then followed a great surprise. The number of fish caught proved to be enormous, far beyond any expectation. Oddly enough, Simon Peter was not grateful, but full of dread when faced with the weight of the miraculous catch of fish that was hauled in. It was causing the boats to sink, and swamping him in the process! Such excess is often the case with Jesus' miracles. They point to liberality: “the divine largesse seems foolish to human minds”<sup>2</sup> – here, enough fish to flood two boats;

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (17 May 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Have the Words of Eternal Life: Scripture*

elsewhere, the abundance of the finest wine kept for the last at Cana or the multiplication of the loaves in the wilderness with leftovers aplenty.

Peter was amazed – as we would be – but also fearful. He saw himself being caught in the Lord’s net, and he was afraid: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Lk 5:8).

It is not difficult for me to imagine that you, too, have cried out these same words, because you find it hard to believe that Jesus has called you to personal relationship with him and called you to carry on his work in the world. Like almost any man, Peter was ashamed of his secrets and his wounds. He knew only too well his own humanness and frailty; he knew he was as full of holes as a sponge. “Could he not have chosen someone else, more capable, more holy? But Jesus has looked lovingly upon each one of us, and in this gaze of his we may have confidence.”<sup>3</sup>

We, too, are Peters: when we are faced by Jesus, when he casts his commanding gaze upon us. Dear brothers, there is no shame in feeling as Peter did when the Lord’s gaze penetrates our mind, our heart and even the very marrow of our being. He also felt confused, unworthy, even inadequate. But it was “precisely in this way, in the humility of

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*Meditations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 208.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Clergy, Warsaw (25 May 2006).

one who knows that he is a sinner, is he called.”<sup>4</sup>

Rather than be discouraged by our own lackluster performance, I think that we should find in these feelings the foundation of a new undertaking, something truly good. Indeed, it is spiritually necessary that we recognize our sinfulness and even our smallness before the greatness of the God. But that is only the first stop on the journey of discipleship.

***Jesus’ Reply to Peter: “Do not be afraid”***

To Peter’s plea that he just be left alone to sink into the water’s depths, Jesus responds alright. The Lord knew his heart and he wanted to free it from a paralyzing fearful anxiety. He also knew he wanted this man, Simon Peter, some day to be the captain of his ship, the leader of his disciples, the Rock-solid foundation of the future community of believers. He foresaw Peter’s misplaced courage in the Garden of Olives when he wielded his sword. And he foresaw that, in the courtyard of the high priest, before the servant girl, Peter’s bravado would collapse and he would declare that he didn’t know him.<sup>5</sup>

Even with all this in mind, Jesus did not reply roughly with reproach for Peter’s lack of faith. Rather, he invited him to trust and to be open to a project that would surpass all his expectations. “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people” (Lk 5:10).

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of the Lord’s Supper (21 April 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of the Lord’s Supper (21 April 2011).

### ***Jesus' Particular Call to Me***

So it is when Jesus calls us: when he calls me, and when he calls you to responsibility. The Lord calls us to a life mission far beyond the assessment we make of our abilities. On Peter's shoulders, Jesus laid the burden of "catching people" (Lk 5:10). This was the moment of the conferral of a mission to Peter.

The great theologian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Blessed John Henry Newman, once wrote: "God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission."<sup>6</sup>

And what is God's mission for you? What is he expecting and wanting from you right now? That you live as a disciple not casually but from conviction? That you place your wounds in his hands? If married, that you be more engaged with your children, more protective of your family? If unmarried, that you consider the call to the priesthood? I can't give you an answer to what your "definite service" is, but I can tell how to find it out. By begging the Holy Spirit to enlighten you and by being ready to accept wherever he is leading you or whatever he is asking of you.

### ***Jesus' Mission for All of Us***

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<sup>6</sup> John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*: "Hope in God – Creator" (7 March 1848).

Each one, then, has a definite service to give the Lord, one that is unique and is no one else's. But there is *one* mission that we share in common. Today too we are all, each one of us, told to cast out our nets, so as to win men and women over to the Gospel – to God, to Christ, to true life. In the opening homily of his pontificate, this is what the Holy Father said about letting down our nets and becoming fishermen:

for a fish, created for water, it is fatal to be taken out of the sea, to be removed from its vital element to serve as human food. But in the mission of a fisher of men, the reverse is true. We are living in alienation, in the salt waters of suffering and death; in a sea of darkness without light. The net of the Gospel pulls us out of the waters of death and brings us into the splendour of God's light, into true life. It is really true: as we follow Christ in this mission to be fishers of men, we must bring men and women out of the sea that is salted with so many forms of alienation and onto the land of life, into the light of God. It is really so: the purpose of our lives is to reveal God to men. And only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. . . . There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know

Him and to speak to others of our friendship with him.<sup>7</sup>

This was Jesus' great challenge. Just as he comforted Peter with confidence in him that he could be a great Apostle, so, too, he says to us takes us: "Do not be afraid! I am with you. I will not abandon you, do not leave me!" "Faith in Jesus, Son of the living God, is the means through which, time and again, we can take hold of Jesus' hand and in which he takes our hands and guides us."<sup>8</sup>

Peter would never have imagined that he would be a "fisher of men" for the Lord and one day even arrive in Rome where he would shed his blood for love of Christ. He accepted his surprising call and let himself be involved in this great adventure: he was generous; he recognized his limits but believed in the One who was calling him and followed him with determination and zeal for souls. He said "yes," a courageous and generous "yes", and became a disciple of Jesus and a proclaimer of the Good News by the integrity of his life and by his willingness to accept the cost and consequences of following his Lord.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Closing Challenge***

Dear brothers: after the providential gift of this Men's Conference,

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily at the Chrism Mass (13 April 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (17 May 2006).

now is the time to be inspired by a new energy for living as Jesus wants you to. What will you do to further the mission of Christ and the Church?

The time in which we live requires heroic Catholic men, not casual Catholics. We can no longer be Catholics merely by convention but instead we must be Catholics by conviction.

In our own families, in our parishes, where we live and where we work – like the Apostle Peter – we must be bold witnesses to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We must be a fearless army of Catholic men, ready to give everything we have for the Lord, who gave everything for our salvation.

In order to accomplish our “definite service” and our common mission I want to place before you three exit challenges. First, make the sacrament of Confession an integral part of your life – not just a yearly or bi-annual event – but a monthly practice. It will keep you honest, healed and holy. Second, take up the practice of reading a short passage from the New Testament every day and praying with it for a while. Don’t try to read too much. I would suggest you start with one of Gospels. And there’s no rush to finish. And third, make it your intention to bring one friend who has lapsed in his practice of the faith back to Christ and to the Church. Don’t nag him, but be courageous – and be ready to give an account of why you believe.



And may Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who watched over the Apostles in the Upper Room as they awaited together the coming of the Holy Spirit, keep watch over you as you become her Son's witnesses here in our Archdiocese and, yes, even "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

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